

# Building a Case Study: A Marketing Academic Trainee's Learner Journey

## Introduction

The lead author of this working paper is a colleague of the Marketing Academy currently entering the second of four years of a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) position at Edinburgh Napier University. The working paper consists of a proposal towards research that will bring together the author's professional practice and doctoral research in a case study. The case study research will gather data on the introduction of a case study that will be used to in a teaching activity with two distinct focus groups consisting of marketing practitioners and students. As part of Edinburgh Napier University's current strategy, Academic members of staff should seek excellence in many areas of practice, including imparting knowledge to students, guiding them to become critical learners, producing research with measurable outcomes, remaining linked with industry, remaining up to date with the latest thinking in our subjects, and ensuring adherence to University procedures and quality processes (E.N.U., 2014). This process is ongoing, with many inter-connected, but separate areas of concern. As this multi-stranded approach to teaching is in line with the marketing discipline itself, which requires environmental scanning and connection with stakeholders to be effective (Ressier, 2013), the challenge for the academic in training is learning and making progress on all fronts simultaneously.

The process of transitioning from a GTA to a fully qualified Academic can be described as a journey in and of itself. Striving towards crossing a threshold where the teaching and research become an integrated whole (Entwistle, 2009) – assuming this equilibrium exists. In the meantime, there is an 'ongoing dynamic of change', which brings with it the freedom to explore, experiment, change and grow as a reflective teaching practitioner (Peel, 2006). As a GTA, there are multiple commitments that place demands on time: Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, doctoral research towards a PhD, 6 hours of teaching experience per week, and juggling all of these commitments whilst also learning to navigate the university structures and engage with processes, such as quality, effectively. In addition, in order to secure full-time employment at the end of this process, a publication record and links to professionals practicing in the field of marketing are required. This proposed research will formalise multiple strands of experience whilst providing a measurable response from students and practitioners.

## Background to the proposed case

As a Marketing GTA seeking to conduct research based on the development of a teaching and learning activity, the question is what kind of pedagogic practices are of particular relevance to the field of marketing? The proposed research is based on the premise that pedagogy should be informed by both research and professional practice (Augenstein & Scherrer, 2014). In addition, pedagogy be informed by wider social change. The proposed case study to be used on the Marketing Research & Communications module aims to critically engage students with the development of bloggers as marketing communication channels. The case is designed to encourage a critical approach to marketing by taking the focus off of management of these channels and potential consumers, and placing the emphasis on the bloggers themselves and the changing communications landscape in which they operate (Tadajewski, 2010).

As part of the University's marketing activities, a group of young lifestyle bloggers were invited to take part in a taster session, featuring some classroom activities, and then blog about their experiences. During one of those sessions, a lecture was presented to the bloggers and their thoughts on how this applied to them was discussed. Permission was sought to record the bloggers' observations for the purposes of developing research and teaching at the

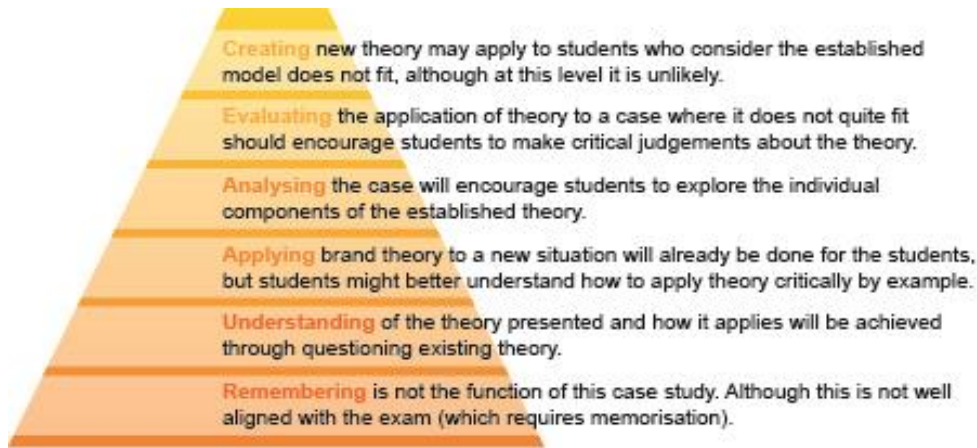
University. The University paid for the travel, accommodation, entertainment and food costs throughout in exchange for publicity through these blogs. This speaks to the significance of bloggers as an emerging marketing communications channel, and is closely linked to the author's own PhD research into food bloggers. As the module is Marketing Research & Communications, it is fitting that the interaction with bloggers and the PhD research should be directly linked to the module's communications content to help prepare students for the shifting communications landscape in which they will build careers (Gardner, 2011).

After reviewing some introductory marketing communications and brand theory with bloggers, there was a discussion around how this theory may or may not apply to how they manage their blogs. While a managerialist perspective might want to learn how bloggers can be used for profit, or how they generate profit, the bloggers were more interested in the practice of blogging. Blogger networks are communities of practice, where in order to be successful and understanding of the existing framework and protocols for interaction are required (Dennen, 2014). These practices operate out-with marketing management frameworks, but marketers are forced to work within these restraints and may even be shaped by them. Because there were so many interesting implications to the blogger comments, the challenge is to introduce their input and theory briefly, but without over-simplifying the complexity of the subject (Lueddeke, 2008). Yin (2014) states that case study can be used to explain concepts and results to non-specialist audiences, which is appropriate for second year students.

By bringing the discussions from bloggers into the classroom, students benefit from indirect interaction with those who have first-hand experience of managing communications online, and this will enrich their understanding of the internet as a communication channel from an alternative perspective (Kiraly, 2014). Through the case study, managerial approaches to marketing communications are introduced and challenged, encouraging students to think critically about future application of theory rather than simply apply it (Gibson-Sweet, 2010).

### **Anticipated Learning from the Case Study**

Marketing Research and Communications is a second year module that runs on several programmes across not only the Business School, but also the University. Because this module is not programme specific, it has the benefit of introducing both Marketing and non-Marketing students to professional practices of Marketers. This provides a variety of students with a unique consumer and market focused approach to routine business strategy, communications and associated issues. The case study does not engage students with gathering information, judging the quality of that information or defining their own questions. Therefore, this is not an activity that encourages students to be partners in producing research (Neary, 2015), but it does help equip them to draw unique conclusions. Students will be asked to make judgements about whether or not bloggers challenge existing marketing theory, and this will help students develop critical skills that will be used later (Selwyn, 2011).



Adapted from Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains (Clark, 2015)

The strength of the research done with the bloggers was the focus-group approach taken in gathering opinions. The focus group allowed bloggers as brands to be explored in a more holistic way, acknowledging individual differences and allowing the conversation to develop around new ideas (Levy, 2011). The resulting case study to be used in the classroom hopes to engage students with a review of blogs as possible communication channels from the perspective of the bloggers.

### **Proposed Methodology**

A case study has been drafted, but will continue to evolve with the doctoral research of the author. Once the case study has been refined, the proposed research will be a review of the case in action with both a group of students and a group of practicing marketing professionals. To test the effectiveness of the case in accomplishing its aim to critically engage students with the development of bloggers as marketing communication channels, focus groups with Edinburgh Napier alumni who now work in marketing communications will take place. The case study should also be implemented in a classroom, with observational notes taken of students engaging with this activity, to allow a triangulation of inspiration and input (Yin, 2014). Concurrently, the author will keep a reflective log of the activities.

The guiding theoretical perspective for this research is social constructivism. We assume that the bloggers have a unique perspective, that students have their own individual perspectives and pre-existing understandings of bloggers, and also that marketing professionals have their own situational understanding (Kiraly, 2014). As the case has been developed within academia, there is also a fourth perspective from the author. By adding to the author's own understanding and development as a academic trainee and bringing in practitioner and student perspective, the reflections on theory application to student learning is an extended collaboration (Zembylas, 2005).

The researcher is seeking to engage a public audience of bloggers that consists of individuals that are neither academics nor marketers. In so doing, it is hoped that critical marketing theory might emerge from the resulting ideas of interactions with bloggers (Murray and Ozanne, 2009). Martin and Lueckenhausen (2005) state that teaching deepens and challenges understanding. Since developing the case study to link with the module curriculum, the author's own assumptions as a student of Marketing have been challenged with a resulting impact on the related doctoral research. By formalising the inter-connected experience of the PG Certificate, Doctoral Research, teaching, and contact with professionals, the author will learn and progress in multiple disciplines simultaneously whilst also benefiting the students being taught and fulfilling several goals of Edinburgh Napier's strategy.

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